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Unrest in Pakistan
Talking Points for the DCI
3 October 1983

The current disturbances in Pakistan are the most serious challenge to President Zia since he took power in 1977. We doubt that he will be ousted as a result of the present political crisis unless widespread protests break out in the key province of Punjab. The Army continues to back Zia, but there are reports of growing sentiment that Zia should negotiate with his political opponents.

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The disturbances in Sind, which arise from deep-seated anger among ethnic Sindhis that their interests have been neglected, have not spread to other provinces.

- Sindhis have long been alienated from Zia's martial law government and were especially embittered by the Army's ouster and execution of former Prime Minister Bhutto, a province native. Sindhis also resent their domination by the largely Punjabi Army and the economic inroads being made in their province by outsiders.
- The worst violence has occurred in central and northern Sind where newly irrigated land is being given to Punjabi settlers, many former Army officers.
- The groups in the forefront of the protests--landlords and local religious leaders--are the most influential in Sindhi society. They have been joined by local elected officials, provincial civil servants, and students.
- In the large cities, where Sindhis are in the minority, disturbances have been small and easily contained.
- Separatist sentiment has gained ground in Sind during Zia's rule. If the government rejects concessions to the traditional Sindhi elites and middle class and decides to crush the dissidents with a heavy hand, the protest could turn into a popular demand for secession.

Protests in the politically crucial Punjab Province have been minimal. The Pakistan People's Party, the major party in opposition to Zia, retains the loyalty of the rural and urban poor but is weakly organized and has been badly hurt by the arrest of most of its leaders. We believe only former Prime Minister Bhutto's widow, who is ill in Europe, or his daughter, who is under house arrest, might be able to galvanize these groups.

- An attempt to disrupt local elections last week failed and voter turnout was equal to previous elections.

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- Key groups--bazaar merchants, the clergy, labor leaders, and students--have so far failed to join the protest movement.

President Zia and his advisers believe the Soviet Union and India are supporting the opposition.

- The USSR has provided funding to leftists active in the opposition and is probably looking for ways to exploit the unrest. The government's close surveillance of Soviet activity and Moscow's desire not to risk mobilizing foreign and domestic support for Zia have constrained past efforts.

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- Prime Minister Gandhi and other senior Indian officials probably would like a civilian-led government in Pakistan instead of continued military rule.

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- Recent charges by Islamabad of foreign instigation probably have increased Punjabi reluctance to challenge the regime.

Pressure on Zia from within the Army to find a solution to the Sind problem will grow if the agitation continues unabated.

- We believe that Zia will eventually have to compromise with moderate opposition leaders and let some of them participate in elections. Failure to negotiate now, while he retains a position of strength, probably would require greater concessions if the civil disturbances spread.
- It will be difficult for major opposition leaders to make a deal with Zia while the disturbances in Sind continue because they would fear losing their credibility.

Prolonged disturbances in Sind would encourage other ethnic and opposition groups to join in the agitation and might eventually force the hand of the senior generals.

- Should Zia himself become the main issue, the Army might remove him to make way for negotiations.
- Widespread violence in Punjab Province alone would quickly bring about the replacement of Zia by another general.

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SUBJECT: Unrest in Pakistan

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